"What Does Russia Want?" Investigating the Interrelationship between Moscow's Domestic and Foreign Policy

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by Igor Torbakov

DGAP Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik e.V.

Summary

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Moscow's increasingly assertive behavior has given rise to intensive speculation as to what the ultimate goals of Russia's foreign policy are. Basically, the question that needs to be answered is: What does Russia want?

I would argue that it is impossible to understand the logic of Russia's international conduct without investigating the intimate and intricate link between the country's domestic politics and its foreign policy. The intent thus is to place a special emphasis on studying how the nature of Russia's socio-political system influences Moscow's policies in the international arena.

I start off with postulating a thesis that, ultimately, the goal of Russian foreign policy efforts is to create conditions for preserving and perpetuating the current political and economic regime, while seeking to attain its legitimation by the international community. Specifically, this means that the Kremlin's three-pronged objective is: to secure the persistence of a system of authoritarian rule and of bureaucratic capitalism; to have this system recognized as valid in its own right—being equal (or even superior) to the Western liberal model; and to integrate Russian economy into the global system while shielding the domestic policies from the "pernicious" outside influences.

My second thesis is that it is precisely the nature of Russia's socio-political system that makes Moscow's policies both towards the West and its ex-Soviet neighbors within the common neighborhood inconsistent and contradictory. Since the specific characteristics of Russia's regime make integration with Western/EU institutions all but impossible, the Kremlin leadership proclaims Russia's strategic independence.

The intent to cast Russia as an independent pole inevitably compels the Kremlin leadership to focus on the country's immediate strategic neighborhood—what has famously been called the sphere of Russia's "privileged interests"—where Russia seeks leadership and closer integration. But paradoxically, the seeming affinity between the authoritarian regime in Russia and those in most East European countries appears to be the main factor preventing successful integration. The thing is that authoritarian power simply cannot be delegated.

This explains why Russia ends up being faced with the seemingly intractable attraction-assertion dilemma. Being unable to integrate its neighbors, Russia seeks to aggressively assert itself and its interests. But Moscow's increasingly muscular policies seem to contradict Russia's stated intention to attract allies and cast itself as an appealing socio-economic model to be emulated by the like-minded partners.

Zusammenfassung

»Was möchte Russland?«

Untersuchung der Wechselbeziehung zwischen Moskaus Innen- und Außenpolitik

von Igor Torbakov

Russlands zunehmend bestimmendes Verhalten hat Spekulationen über die ultimativen Ziele russischer Außenpolitik befeuert. Grundsätzlich sollte in diesem Zusammenhang die Frage beantwortet werden: Was möchte Russland? Dafür muss unbedingt die enge und komplizierten Verbindung zwischen der Innen- und Außenpolitik des Landes untersucht werden. Ziel ist es deshalb, einen besonderen Schwerpunkt auf die Frage zu legen, wie das Wesen des russischen sozio-politischen Systems Moskaus Politik gegenüber dem internationalen Umfeld beeinflusst.

Ich beginne mit der These, dass die Anstrengungen russischer Außenpolitik letztendlich dem Ziel dienen, das bestehende politische und ökonomische Regime aufrechtzuerhalten und zu schützen, wobei die internationale Gemeinschaft dieses Regime auch noch legitimieren soll. Im Besonderen heißt das, dass der Kreml drei Ziele hat: Sicherung des Fortbestehens eines Systems autoritärer Herrschaft und eines bürokratischen Kapitalismus; Anerkennung dieses Systems als gültig aus eigenem Recht – gleichwertig (oder gar überlegen) zum westlich-liberalen Modell; und Integration der russischen Wirtschaft in die Weltwirtschaft mit Abschirmung der Innenpolitik von »schädlichen« äußeren Einflüssen.

Meine zweite These lautet, dass gerade dieses russische sozio-politische System Moskaus Politik gegenüber dem Westen und seinen postsowjetischen Nachbarn unbeständig und gegensätzlich macht. Da die besondere Charakteristik des russischen Regimes eine Integration mit westlichen und EU-Institutionen fast ausschließt, verkündet das Land seine strategische Unabhängigkeit. Die Absicht, Russland als unabhängigen Pol zu präsentieren, zwingt die Kremlführung dazu, sich auf die unmittelbare Nachbarschaft zu konzentrieren – was bekanntlich als Sphäre russischer »privilegierter Interessen« bezeichnet wird. In dieser Region strebt Russland einen Führungsanspruch und enge Integration an. Paradoxerweise scheint die scheinbare Geistesverwandtschaft zwischen dem autoritären Regime in Russland und denen in den meisten osteuropäischen Ländern das Haupthindernis für eine erfolgreiche Integration zu sein.

Dieser Zusammenhang erklärt, warum Russland letztendlich einem unlösbaren Anreiz-Behauptungsdilemma gegenübersteht. Indem es unfähig ist, seine Nachbarn zu integrieren, versucht Russland aggressiv sich selbst und seine Interessen durchzusetzen. Jedoch scheint Moskaus zunehmendes Muskelspiel seinem erklärten Ziel zu widersprechen, Verbündete zu gewinnen und sich selbst als ein attraktives sozio-ökonomisches Modell, das von den gleichgesinnten Partnern nachgeahmt wird, zu präsentieren. Aus diesem Grund wird Russland in seiner Nachbarschaft als Raufbold wahrgenommen, gegen den man antreten muss, statt als wohlmeinender Anführer.

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Over the past decade, Russia got back on its feet after the period of humiliating weakness in the 1990s and sought to reassert itself as a Great Power in post-Soviet Eurasia. Simultaneously, its post-communist socio-political system that emerged from under the rubble of the Soviet collapse seemed to have reached maturity. These developments gave rise to the assertions that we are witnessing the reemergence of Russian habitual—some even say, Soviet-like—patterns: authoritarian politics, state-dominated economics, and the sense of strategic autonomy which, in their turn, affect how the elites define and pursue Russia's "national interests." Indeed, what *is* the relationship between Russia's domestic situation and its foreign policy? I would argue that this crucial linkage is still inadequately understood. Thus, looking into the nature of present-day Russia's regime type and analyzing it within a broad historical context becomes absolutely essential to make sense of continuities and discontinuities in post-Soviet Russia's behavior. My own understanding of Russia's socio-political trajectory is informed by the notions of "backwardness," "path dependency," "service-class revolution," "patrimonial rule," "neo-feudalism," and "resource state," advanced and developed in the works of Alexander Gerschenkron, Richard Hellie, Stefan Hedlund, Dmitry Furman, Simon Kordonsky, and Jack Snyder.[1]

The detailed analysis of the present-day Russian socio-political system is of course beyond the scope of this paper. Several crucial things, though, need to be pointed out. Arguably, Russian history is best understood as the process of adaptation to (relative) backwardness and perceived external threats. Historically, the pervading sense of backwardness vis-à-vis the "developed West" seems to have been (and remain) one of the key elements of Russian self-understanding. "We cannot deceive ourselves any longer," the liberal-minded Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolayevich was lamenting about the sorry state the imperial Russia had found itself in the 19th century. "…We are both weaker and poorer than the first-class powers, and furthermore poorer not only in material but also in mental resources, especially in matters of administration."[2] Under completely different geopolitical circumstances, when Soviet Russia was in fact casting itself as the vanguard of progressive humankind, Josef Stalin, who had just launched his "Great Break," seemed to eerily echo the Russian royal's apprehension. "We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries," he famously said. "We must make good this lag in ten years. Either we do it or they crush us."[3] In the immediate aftermath of the 2004 Beslan debacle, President Vladimir Putin bemoaned the Russian leadership's inability to adequately assess and react to the numerous external and internal threats. Instead, he said, "we displayed weakness. And the weak are beaten."[4]

In a vast, economically poor and sparsely populated country with porous borders, this sense of insecurity and vulnerability has inevitably led, over the past half-millennium, to the practice of mobilization of all available resources for the purpose of combatting (real or perceived) foreign threats. The ever-present need to be at the ready and mobilize all natural and human resources structured Russian society (both pre-revolutionary and Soviet) into castes all serving what some scholars call the "garrison state." Some castes would, naturally, be "more equal than others"—the privileged position of the service class (nobility, bureaucracy or party nomenklatura) would be the main driver behind the elite's

striving to legitimize and perpetuate their rule. As a result, Russia's pattern of development would take on the form of alternating cycles of reform and stagnation (or those of "service-class revolution" and its subsequent degeneration).

Remarkably, such a pattern of adaptation to backwardness and perceived threats appeared to be a source of the perennial conflict with the more advanced Western states. "This was not because Russia was an exceptionally aggressive state compared to the other Great Powers," Jack Snyder perceptively explains. "It was because the *distinctive nature* of Russia's power, institutions, and ideologies, arising from the pattern of late development, created a situation in which Russia and the West seemed inherently threatening to each other."[5]

Making Sense of Russia's Post-Soviet Trajectory: the End of "Russian transition"

After the Soviet Union's disintegration and the "really existing socialism's" collapse, the opportunity seemed to appear for Russia to finally break out of the previous almost 500 year-long pattern of development. Russia's new rulers embraced the democratic rhetoric and set about—so they claimed—to build in Russia the Western-like political system based on the rule of law and liberal market democracy. At the time, the Russian elite's intention to "catch up with the West through direct emulation" seemed only natural: there appeared to be no other viable ideology and social model—the Western-style liberal democracy was the only game in town. For its part, the West, too, was very enthusiastic about and supportive of Russia's initial post-communist transformation. The thing is, however, that due to historical legacy Russia (and most other ex-Soviet nations for that matter) couldn't build the Western-style polity and economics. Neither the country's elites nor the public were prepared—either culturally, or intellectually or psychologically—to pull off such a feat. Ultimately, institutional deficit trumped wishful thinking. It quickly became clear that a properly functioning legal system, the property rights' protection, a vibrant civil society, political parties cannot just pop up (or be hastily created) simply because they are urgently needed. For its part, the West, truth be told, wasn't nearly as helpful as the grandiose scale of Russia's transformation demanded. As a result, post-Soviet Russia, basically left to its own devices, was again confronted with the dilemmas of backwardness.

Under the circumstances, the only feasible way to deal with this problem was the one dictated by the logic of path dependency: after the initial chaotic "transformation period" (1990s), the elites, invoking the need of "stabilization," habitually opted for more centralization, larger role of the state in economic sphere, and stricter control over political life. Thus, notwithstanding the official rhetoric asserting Russia's European normality, a *different* kind of system emerged and matured in Russia—*distinct* from both the old Soviet communism and the Western liberal democracy. In all three key "transition areas"—transitions from command economy to free market, from authoritarianism to liberal democracy, and from imperial entity to nation-state—Russia has demonstrated a rather dubious record, which, overall, represents quite a mixed bag. It does have a market economy (which is, to be sure, no small achievement in itself), but its economic system isn't fully free; in contrast to the Soviet times, its society is open, but its political system is closed and remains largely authoritarian; and it still finds itself in the midst of post-imperial readjustment, struggling to define the notion of "Russianness" and forge a nation-state. Against this background, then, in the long-term perspective, Russia seems to remain a "transition society"—in a sense that such type of authoritarian regime, as Max Weber pointed out, is inherently unstable and thus, in the *longue durée,* ultimately unsustainable.

But in the short- to medium-term, given the strong vested interests in preserving the *status quo,* the "Russian transition" has ended: post-Soviet Russia is a *sui generis* entity with its own logic of operation and development. Its socio-political system appears to be (relatively) stable so far, and its life cycle hasn't run full course yet, although, arguably, Russia's political regime has already entered the phase of decline.

Regime type and ensuing policy contradictions

While differing substantially from the liberal Western model, the Russian authoritarian system continues to make use of democratic rhetoric and of quasi-democratic procedures to legitimize its rule. This aspect of the system's workings is of principal importance. To be sure, "democratic" procedures, norms and institutions are employed as a camouflage to cover up the patently undemocratic system of power. But, unlike other, more traditional authoritarian regimes such as absolute monarchies or military dictatorships, the present-day Russian political system doesn't rely on either the ancient monarchical tradition or the army's brute force. It is, according to one astute observer's characteristic, an "electoral autocracy"[6]—a personalized regime with a strong domestic base. Thus "phony democracy" is an absolutely indispensable element of the post-Soviet Russian polity.

This deeply dichotomous nature of the current Russian regime—with its central contradiction between authoritarian ways and pseudo-democratic phraseology—is clearly reflected in Moscow's international behavior which also appears to be contradictory and inconsistent. While its seeming adherence to democratic values is supposed to call for an ever closer alliance between Russia and the West, the undemocratic nature of the country's socio-political system forces the elites to make sure that the Western impact on Russia's domestic order and on the way it does business is minimal. Yet, there are also limits to Russia's ability to defy the Western countries or pursue the openly anti-Western policies. Unlike the defunct Soviet Union, today's Russia is not an ideological state. In fact, it doesn't have any ideology of its own and is wary (for good reasons) to use Russian nationalism as a source of ideological legitimation. This compels the Russian elites to present their country as a specific kind of democracy—to be accepted in the world's prestigious international clubs such as G8. External recognition by the peers amongst the advanced industrialized democracies and domestic legitimacy appear to be closely intertwined and inter-dependent: as elections in Russia are increasingly being viewed as a sham, the elite's desire to get the country's social system recognized by the leading Western partners as basically falling within a democratic norm seems to intensify. At the same time, being recognized as a democracy is a *sine qua non* for obtaining a pass into the international society's "supreme league." The need of legitimation by the West acts as a certain restraint on the Russian regime.

Some political scientists call this regime, quite aptly, a "patrimonial authoritarianism,"[7] noting that it is based both in its political and economic spheres not so much on the formal rules and institutions as on the informal patronage networks. Notably, it is the re(emergence) of the system of personal dependence and clienteles within the relations of power in Russia that prompted a number of scholars to talk about the revival of certain archaic practices that, in the aggregate, can be characterized as "neo-feudalism."[8] They point to the new prominence of the "service class" in Russian political system, the establishment of the rigid social hierarchy made of "estates" and corporations which hinder social mobility, as well as the conditional character of property which is being constantly re-divided, re-distributed and often simply taken away by raw force.

One paradox of the Russian "neo-feudalism" is that this system (which historically served the mobilization purposes in order to "catch up" with the more advanced and potentially threatening neighbors) has re-emerged at a time when the elites appeared to have given up any development strategies based on mobilization. Thus we are witnessing a glaring contradiction: there exists a privileged "service class" (a "new Russian nobility," in the words of the Chairman of the Russian Security Council, Gen. Nikolai Patrushev), but there is no "service class revolution" that would give a new spurt to the country's development (like the ones in the 15th–16th centuries, Peter the Great's or Stalin's) on the horizon. Yet this is actually what "patrimonial authoritarianism" is all about: this regime type is just a means the ruling elites use for their self-preservation. It is utterly useless for any kind of modernization policies—either mobilization-based or innovation-based.

The persistence of the resource state

There is one important function, however, that the ruling elite continue to perform—as it did in all previous historical incarnations of the Russian state—and that is the mobilization and management of resources. The thing is, persuasively argues the sociologist Simon Kordonsky, that what the standard textbooks normally call "economics," within the Russian context is better to characterize as the "resource-based organization of social life."[9] The upshot is that throughout most of its modern history Russia had what can be termed a "resource state." The main objectives of such type of state have been and remain the mobilization and management of resources which are not regarded as mere commodities and whose true value isn't expressed in monetary form. Ideally, Kordonsky contends, mobilization of resources means that the state would have a nearly total control of, and manage, *all* material and human flows. One fundamental consequence of this state of things is that, historically, Russia's administrative-territorial system, industrial structure and social organization were in fact derivative from the process of exploration, extraction, accumulation, distribution and consumption of resources. Resource states give rise to what the political economists Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson call the "extractive institutions."[10] The ruling elites in the countries where the acting norms and laws protect the property rights of the privileged minority and discriminate against the majority of the population use the state's "monopoly on violence" to line their pockets, redistribute property and perpetuate their privileged status. Extractive political and economic institutions are mutually reinforcing: those who have all advantages usually end up having also all the resources needed for the preservation of their power. In Russia, the country richly endowed with natural resources, the "extractive" regime rests upon the extractive industries: Russian abundance in hydrocarbons encourages the elites to establish control and hold on to what effectively is a symbiosis of political power and economic wealth.

Indeed, the current structure of the Russian elite neatly reflects the prominence of what is locally known as the "fuel and energy complex." Oil and gas sector as well as finances are viewed by the ruling elites as the "commanding heights" and lifeblood of national economy which is best to keep under the state supervision and control. This situation leads to a notable contradiction pertaining to the sphere of foreign relations. On the one hand, Russia's energy companies are interested in cooperation with whomever they can strike most lucrative bargains—which, of course, mostly means the Western partners. Yet on the other hand, these companies are run by the representatives of the elite who have the closest ties with Russia's state bureaucracy, are most dependent on, and subservient to it. They are basically intertwined with the current regime and hell-bent on preserving the *status quo,* thus perpetuating the polity that makes Russia a kind of odd man out vis-à-vis the West and presents an obstacle to a genuine rapprochement between Moscow and the Western world.

The persistence of Russia's "resource state" (coupled with the recent spike in the demand for commodities) appears to have also influenced the re-evaluation of Russia's understanding of what the country's relative strategic advantages really are. During the previous decade some theorists tried to de-emphasize the role and significance of territory as a factor in international relations, while arguing that what constitutes a true advantage is the mastering of high technology and information. But now, with the growing global hunger for gas, oil, water, food, and all sorts of natural resources, the thesis that "the (territorial) size matters" seems to be back in vogue again. A country's land—and all the riches that might be hidden in its subsoil—came to be seen as a valuable asset. A number of prominent Russian political thinkers (such as, for example, Sergei Karaganov) contend that these days territory should be viewed as a source of strength rather than of weakness.[11]

By the same token, the state of Russia's other key asset, which during Soviet times used to be called, in the wooden communist idiom, the "labor resources," cannot fail to make the Russian elites wary. In terms of power politics, continuous shrinking of Russia's human stock clearly presents a serious strategic problem. But this appears to

be a chronic dilemma that Russia has been struggling to adapt to throughout its history: limitless expanses, limited population. The larger the country, the longer its borders, the more difficult it is to defend them with meager human resources at hand—the stronger the sense of vulnerability and the more acute the threat perception. It is precisely this dilemma that, after all, gave rise to the development of societal relations which made Russia's socio-political system distinct vis-à-vis the other European Great Powers.

Understanding Russia's interests

So what does post-Soviet Russia actually want? At this point any honest analyst would have to concede that Moscow's interests are not easily discernible and rationalized. The tiny group of top policymakers (the self-styled "ruling elite") that craft the country's foreign policy is not completely free in making their choices from the interests of broader elite strata—the upper echelons of state bureaucracy and the "titans" of big (mostly state-controlled) business. The divergence of interests and perspectives within Russian ruling circles feeds the foreign policy debate on the more specific issues that go beyond what appears to be a broad general consensus at the heart of which is the assertion of Russia's status as an independent great power and the recognition of the desirability of securing favorable external conditions for further growth. The broadest common interest uniting all segments of the elite is securing and perpetuating the elite's dominant position within the Russian political system.

The study of Russian interests is particularly challenging given the fact that the line between what is generally understood as *national interests* and the *group interests* is completely blurred in Russia. This situation of opacity is generated by the very character of the present-day Russian elite. The Kremlin ruling group represents a specific blend of political and economic power—*vlastesobstvennost',* to use the Russian neologism. But this symbiosis of politics and business—the so-called Russia Inc.—creates the situation in which the state has virtually no autonomy from the economic interests of the individuals who run it. As the major Russian business groups have long been engaged in the aggressive expansion in post-Soviet Eurasia and beyond, the task of distinguishing between Moscow's foreign-policy moves driven by ostensibly legitimate "vital national interests" and those driven by the naked pursuit of profit becomes especially daunting.

Against this background, Russian overall stance is best described by the schizophrenic formula: "achieving rapprochement with the West *while* keeping aloof of the West." In practical terms, the Russian elite's interests look equally ambiguous. On the one hand, they seek their "personal" integration into the Western world. After all, it is where the Russian "rich and famous" keep their money, second homes, and often their families as well. Furthermore, the Kremlin official propaganda notwithstanding, Western countries are regarded in Russia—both at the elite and mass public level—as highly developed, affluent and attractive nations, whose friendship it is worth seeking for both material and symbolic reasons. In a word, the Russian elite want to be perceived in the West as "their own kind."

On the other hand, however, the Russians seemed to have realized the principled incompatibility of patrimonial authoritarianism and liberal democracy earlier than did their Western counterparts. But, since the impossibility of integration either *into* or *with* the West cannot, for obvious reasons, be ideologically explained within Russian society in any meaningful way, the Russian elite has set forth the thesis that Russia is going to engage with the West only on its *own terms.* In practice, this basically means two things.

First, the Russian elite appears to insist on the selective approach to the values of (European) modernity that is justified by the references to Russia's "uniqueness" and to the "unsuitability" for it of the Western liberal model due to the country's " specific historical path." At the conceptual level, this is reflected in the symbolic elevation of the notion of *suverenitet* (sovereignty). In domestic politics, the interpretation of *suverenitet* boils down to the Russian elite's opting for: the market economy, but of a kind that is controlled by the state

(bureaucracy) and characterized by the proliferation of a number of clearly non-market practices; the legal dualism—the existence of the "white" and "grey" legal zones and the deployment of so-called selective justice; the top-down structuring of the society (the proverbial *vertikal' vlasti*) and the lack of public oversight over state bureaucracy; the "phony democracy" that is devoid of genuine political pluralism.

Second, for Russia, interacting with the West on its own terms involves Moscow's claim to the status of *derzhava* (great power) and demand to be treated as an equal to the other world centers of power. Immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia declared itself legal successor to the defunct Soviet state, which presupposed, among other things, the restoration of Russia's dominant geopolitical role in Eurasia. Arguably, Russian leadership in the post-Soviet lands has remained, for a while, an auxiliary project subordinate to the country's officially stated main ambition—the integration into the "civilized world." But as the integration with the West has proved increasingly impractical, the Russian policy elite advanced an updated vision of the global order which is encapsulated in the concept of multipolarity. In the 21st century, this concept holds, U.S. unipolar moment has ended—mainly due to America's drastically reduced influence as a result of an "imperial overstretch" (caused by the Iraq debacle and the Afghanistan quagmire), the rise of China and India, and, last but not least, the rebirth of the Russian power. Thus, in the new multipolar global system Russia is destined to be one of the principal poles acting as a major independent player in the international arena and a natural center of gravity for other ex-Soviet countries.

Note that the final parting with "Westernizing illusions" neatly coincided with Russia's acquiring very significant financial resources due to the energy revenues windfall. By about the same time (mid-2000s) Russia has fully restored its sovereignty and secured strategic independence having paid down all its debts to Western creditors. As they have gotten the means to pursue the more muscular policies that befit a true great power and rid themselves of the "false ambition" of making Russia a part of the Western world, Russian rulers have focused on what is closer to home—the "gathering of post-Soviet lands."

The difficulties of the post-imperial readjustment

For Russia, however, to integrate the former imperial borderlands around Moscow is easier said than done. There appear to be several powerful constraints that hinder Russia's integrationist drive. First, while some Russian policymakers constantly invoke the EU template, the experience of European integration is hardly relevant for post-Soviet lands where Russia dwarfs all other potential partners. The dramatic difference in size, economic potential and military might between Russia and other ex-Soviet republics makes Russia, on the one hand, a "natural leader" in the region, but, on the other hand, allows for just one viable integration scenario, namely the restoration of Russian hegemony. It is precisely this scenario that was advanced by Anatoly Chubais in his vision of "Russia as a liberal empire."[12] Needless to say, such a vision made all Russia's neighbors wary and suspicious of Moscow's real intentions. The neighbors' wariness becomes all the more acute as Russian policymakers continue championing the idea of brazen "national egoism." Clearly, the latter is a very poor conceptual underpinning of any integrationist policy which, by contrast, would put a special premium on the notions of accommodation and compromise.

The second constraint appears to stem from the very nature of Russia's and most of its ex-Soviet neighbors' socio-political systems. Seeking to preserve the strategic environment that would be most conducive for the perpetuation of political and economic wellbeing of Russia's powers-that-be, Moscow strives to counter what it perceives as the Western attempts at undermining the kindred authoritarian regimes in post-Soviet lands. Supporting the same-type systems in what Russia's policy elite believes is its geopolitical sphere of influence is perceived as a *sine qua non* for this elite's ultimate long-term survival. But, ironically, it is precisely

the policy of propping up the post-Soviet authoritarian rulers that puts a brake on any potential integration process: authoritarian power is *indivisible;* it cannot be transferred or delegated to any supra-national bodies. Nothing illustrates this better than the uneasy relationship between the two seemingly "brotherly" regimes—authoritarian Russia and authoritarian Belarus which technically even formed a "unified state." Moscow's vision of the two countries' "integration" is unacceptable for the Belarusian leader, as such a scenario will turn him into a governor of yet another Russian province. Russia's persistent attempts to impose its political will by ramping up pressure on Minsk—usually through the deployment of its energy and trade leverage—invariably leads to the escalation in bilateral relations and sets the Belarusian leadership on a course of geopolitical maneuvering.

The deficit of normative power

Finally, there is a question of an ideational dimension of integration. True, of late, Russia seeks to cast itself as a potential "norm-maker," pretending to act as a normative counterweight to the EU. "If we believe that the institutions of Western democracy cannot be fully accepted in post-Soviet Eastern Europe," some Kremlin-connected ideologues argue, "why can't we discuss this openly?"[13] But, remarkably, these political thinkers never go into details as to what exactly the alternative values and institutions might be. There seems to be a good reason for such a reluctance to be specific: the Russian elite, which is unable to even come up with a proper term of its own that would characterize its distinct political system, is definitely in no position to throw a gauntlet to Europe's democratic ideal. As one Russian wit has put it, the slogan "For the world-wide victory of phony democracy!" doesn't sound terribly inspiring.[14]

That's how Russia finds itself trapped in what I call the attraction-assertion dilemma. Despite the considerable amount of soft power that Russia still possesses in post-Soviet lands (the Russian language as the communications medium across the ex-Soviet territories, the attractiveness of Russian highbrow and popular culture, the spiritual authority of the Russian Orthodox Church, etc.),[15] the constraints discussed above prevent it from acting as a powerful magnet able to integrate the region around itself. But, absent the power of attraction, Moscow has to resort to the power of assertion, or, in Dmitry Trenin's felicitous phrase, instead of love it offers its neighbors tough love.[16] Thus Russia's relations with the same-type regimes in Eurasia can only take the shape of a relationship between hegemon and satellite states. As Russia's neighbors don't deem such a prospect to be particularly attractive, they opt for the most natural kind of behavior under the circumstances: they all have become the classical "balancers."

Conclusion

It is precisely the belated realization that the persistence of the current political and economic system in Russia makes the integration of the country with the Western institutions unfeasible, coupled with the inability to find a mutually acceptable modus operandi that chronically sours the relationship between Moscow and the Western world. So what appears, at the first glance, to be a foreign policy problem might well be rooted in the realm of Russian domestic politics. Moscow's prickly reaction to any prospect of EU and/or NATO eastern enlargement (or to whatever Western activism in the new Eastern Europe) illustrates the intimate link between the "foreign" and the "domestic." What Moscow claims to be primarily a security issue is rather a problem stemming from Russia's inability to fully embrace (European) modernity and complete the construction of modern polity—a law-governed state that upholds political and economic pluralism.

There is no denial that at the moment "Russia is back." The country did rebound and revived itself after nearly hitting the rock bottom in the 1990s, thus proving right those rare contrarians who almost two decades ago presciently argued that Russia's revival was inevitable. But will the Russian elites have their wish—to have Russia's great power status fully legitimized? Will post-Soviet Russia be finally recognized as being on a par with the world's other great powers? Some leading

Russian analysts do believe that now Russia has a golden opportunity for pursuing a very successful foreign policy.[17] Russia's main Western geopolitical competitors (the U.S. and the EU) are significantly weakened, they argue, and probably for the first time in the country's history there is no serious external threat worth mentioning. More important, however, it turned out that the very aspects of the Russian conduct that seemed outdated and belonging to the 19th century diplomatic toolkit (such as the reliance on hard power, realist geopolitics, privileging national over international and championing the enhanced role of the state) are, in fact, "post-modern" and better suited to the realities of the 21st century as we are witnessing the process of the "renationalization of international relations" with national states playing a more prominent role worldwide. The bottom line, this argument contends, is that in today's "new old world" Russia's seemingly old-fashioned policy turns out to be precisely what the doctor ordered: as a result, Russia proves to be a more effective international actor that is able to punch above its weight.

Yet there is an alternative argument: until Russia becomes a truly *modern* state, its socio-political system (as well as its "national interests") is unlikely to be regarded as fully legitimate. Some astute political thinkers (such as, for example, Iver Neumann) have argued that the key problem Russia is facing in its quest for recognition is in fact a *social* one.[18] Briefly, it boils down to the incompatibility between the Russian and European regime types and, specifically, between the ways they structure the relationship between state and society. So long as the societal differences between Russia and the other (Western) great powers continue to persist, Russia will be regarded as lacking social power to be perceived by the West as "its own kind" thus perpetuating mutual suspicions and mistrust that chronically haunted the relationship between Russia and its Western neighbors.

The EU's and Russia's diverging approaches toward internal governance seriously impact on the bilateral relationship. To be sure, the latter is characterized by the massive interdependence as well as by the multidimensional cooperation. Yet the EU and Russia are also vigorously competing, not least in their shared neighborhood. Both actors appear to be exercising normative and structural power—seeking to control, to varying degrees, the realms of security, finances, and ideas in the region—, in order to shape their strategic environment.[19] Although Moscow and Brussels seem to recognize the advantages that their constructive interaction in the "in-between Europe" could provide to better confront the challenges emanating from the region, for the foreseeable future, it is competition that is the name of the game.[20]

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Notes

1 Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective,* Cambridge, MA, 1962; idem, *Europe in the Russian Mirror,* Cambridge 1970; Richard Hellie, "The Structure of Russian Imperial History," in: *History and Theory,* December 2005; Stefan Hedlund, *Russian Path Dependence,* London 2005; Dmitry Furman, *Dvizhenie po spirali: Politicheskaia sistema Rossii v riadu drugikh sistem,* Moscow 2010; Simon Kordonsky, *Resursnoe gosudarstvo,* Moscow 2007; Jack Snyder, "Russian Backwardness and the Future of Europe," in: *Daedalus* 2/1994.

2 Dominic Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War,* Houndmills 1983, p. 21.

3 See Stalin's speech at the First All-Union Conference of the Workers of Socialist Industry, 04/02/1931 in: I. V. Stalin, *Sobranie sochinenii* (in 16 vols.), Moscow 1951, vol. 13, p. 38–39.

4 See Putin's address to the citizens of Russia, 04/09/2004, <http://www.lenta.ru/russia/2004/09/04/putin/>.

5 Snyder, "Russian Backwardness," p. 185 (note 1) [emphasis added].

6 Cf. Igor Klyamkin, "Postsovetskaia politicheskaia sistema v Rossii (vozniknovenie, evoliutsiia i perspektivy transformatsii)," in: *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 17/2000. Remarkably, Boris Gryzlov, speaker of the Russian State Duma, has recently advanced his own peculiar definition: *"Autocratic people's power*—or if one translates this from Russian into a foreign language—a sovereign democracy is, historically, the most appropriate form of government for Russia." (Cf. Gryzlov's speech at the international conference marking the 105th anniversary of parliamentarianism in Russia, St. Petersburg, 27/04/2011, <http://er-duma.ru/news/>).

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13 See the interview with the "political technologist" Gleb Pavlovsky in: *Moskovskii komsomolets,* 21/12/2004.

14 Furman, *Dvizhenie po spirali* (note 1), p. 122.

15 Cf. Nicu Popescu, "Russia's Soft Power Ambitions" (CEPS Policy Brief, no. 115), Brussels, October 2006.

16 Dmitry Trenin, *Odinochnoe plavanie* (Carnegie Moscow Center), Moscow 2009, p. 26.

17 Karaganov, "Rossii vezet" (note 11).

18 Iver B. Neumann, "Russia as a Great Power, 1815-2007," in: *Journal of International Relations and Development* 2/2008.

19 Derek Averre, "Competing Rationalities: Russia, the EU and the 'Shared Neighbourhood'," in: *Europe-Asia Studies* 10/2009.

20 The most recent evaluation of EU-Russia relations recognizes as much. See Justin Vaisse et al., *European Foreign Policy: Scorecard 2010* (European Council on Foreign Relations), London 2011.

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